

Influenza

Disease Fact Sheet Series

What is influenza?

Influenza or "flu" is a respiratory disease caused by two main types of influenza virus – type A and type B. It is a seasonal illness that occurs each winter in Wisconsin and throughout the United States. It is not a reportable disease in Wisconsin, and the annual number of cases is unknown.

How is influenza spread?

Influenza is spread from person to person when droplets of moisture from a person with influenza are spread through the air when that person coughs, sneezes or talks. These droplets contain viruses that when inhaled by another person can cause an infection.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms appear typically 1 to 3 days after exposure to respiratory droplets from an infected person.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

Influenza illness ranges from very mild to severe, depending on such factors as the influenza strain involved, and the person's susceptibility and general physical condition. Symptoms include fever, chills, headache, dry cough, and aching in the muscles and joints. Most people recover within a week after they become ill, although they may continue to feel tired for several days. Influenza can last longer and cause life-threatening complications in elderly persons, persons with chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, heart, lung, or kidney disease, severe anemia, or chronic diseases that weaken the immune system including persons with HIV or AIDS infection.

How long is an infected person able to spread influenza?

An infected person can spread influenza virus in discharges from their nose and throat from 24 hours before the onset of their illness to 3-5 days after onset of illness. Young children and persons with a weakened immune system can spread the virus for 7 days or longer.

(Over)

How is influenza diagnosed?

Usually the diagnosis is based on the appearance of specific signs and symptoms of influenza. Confirmation can be achieved through laboratory testing of throat specimens or blood samples.

How is influenza treated?

Certain anti-viral drugs available with a physician's prescription may reduce the severity of disease caused by influenza if therapy is started early in the course of the illness (within 48 hours of the beginning of symptoms). Otherwise, bed rest, drinking increased amounts of liquids, and taking pain relievers to help reduce the discomfort of illness is recommended. Children with influenza should not be treated with aspirin due to the risk of developing Reye's Syndrome.

Who should receive influenza vaccine?

Influenza vaccine should be given to persons at high risk of developing complications from influenza. This includes, but is not limited to:

- 1) Adults and children with chronic disorders, especially lung and heart conditions.
- 2) Persons aged 50 years and older.
- 3) Children and teenagers receiving long-term aspirin therapy;
- 4) Persons with diabetes, renal dysfunction or a weakened immune system due to chronic illnesses or medications.
- 5) Those providing care to high risk individuals, including health care providers, nursing home staff, household contacts and volunteer caregivers.
- 6) Women who are pregnant, especially those who will be in their second or third trimester of pregnancy during the influenza season.

When should persons at high risk of developing complications due to influenza, receive influenza vaccine?

The best time to vaccinate persons who are at high risk of complications from influenza, is during October and November.

Is there any other way to prevent influenza other than vaccination?

Yes, certain drugs may help to prevent influenza in high-risk persons or their caregivers who need protection during an influenza outbreak, but who have not been vaccinated. A physician should be consulted about the use of these drugs.